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THE IMPACT OF THE ARTS FOR STUDENTS WITH MODERATE TO  
SEVERE DISABILITIES

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Special Education

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by

Rebekah Fuss

August 2015

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

We hereby approve the thesis of

Rebekah Fuss

Candidate for the degree of Master of Education

APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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Dean of Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

### THE IMPACT OF THE ARTS FOR STUDENTS WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE DISABILITIES

by

Rebekah Fuss

August 2015

Students with moderate to severe disabilities are often left out of arts programs, especially in rural areas where resources are limited and drama, music and art classes are often not available. This action research study focused on a small group of students in a self-contained classroom in a high school. The classroom teacher worked with a teaching artist to start an art program for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Even though there are limited resources in rural areas, it is still possible to create a quality arts integration program which requires planning and effective collaboration with other teachers and artists. This study showed an increase in student interest in art and an increase in knowledge of basic art skills. Arts integration, even at the very basic level can have a positive impact on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom.

*Keywords:* arts integration, teaching artists, self-contained classroom, art, special education

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*“Education driven by passion awakens us to a world bigger than ourselves  
and makes us curious.” – Yo-Yo Ma*

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of the self-contained classroom, which includes students with moderate to severe disabilities at the high school level, is preparing students for post-school life and helping them become contributing members of the community. Academic and transition goals overlap as students are prepared to live as independently as possible after high school. As students in a self-contained classroom, they are often left out of opportunities offered to the rest of the students in the school such as enrichment activities, including the arts. Arts integration has been shown to increase student engagement and enrich personal interests and goals, so why not include students with moderate to severe disabilities in these activities as well? (Robinson, 2013); (Stickley, Crosbie & Hui, 2012)?

This study is an action research project that was implemented in a self-contained classroom in a high school in a small town in Washington State. The classroom teacher wanted to see how the students with moderate to severe disabilities responded to the implementation of arts integration. According to Creswell (2015), action research is a way for teachers to examine their own practices and work with other professionals to resolve an issue or implement a new practice. Action research combines both quantitative and qualitative data to analyze and come to a conclusion of how to implement best practices in the classroom based on the results. In this study, the classroom teacher was the researcher and worked together with a teaching artist in teaching the students as well as analyzing the data that were collected.

Arts integration does not have just one definition and it can vary from standalone art projects to full integration across the curriculum with all subjects and applying visual art, music and dance movement. Studies in arts integration across curriculum show that it requires careful

planning and maintaining a high quality instruction is essential to success (Appel, 2006). The investigators at Harvard Project Zero conducted research about quality indicators in arts programs in a variety of schools across the country (Seidel et al., 2009). Their conclusion was that training for both teachers and teaching artists was imperative to produce a high quality program and therefore would make a difference in achievement outcome.

The classroom teacher attended a seminar: *The Arts & Passion-Driven Learning* sponsored by Harvard Graduate School of Education and The Silk Road Project. The seminar is based on data collected through Project Zero, which supports the idea that the arts should be available to all students because they bridge gaps of instruction and spark enthusiasm in students of all skill levels (Seidel et al., 2009). There was a consistent message from all presenters that the arts were especially effective in education when classroom teachers worked together with teaching artists to raise the quality of participation by the students and instill in them the importance of learning from rehearsals and drafts to achieve their greatest potential.

There are a wide variety of definitions for arts integration as is evident in the literature review. Although the classroom teacher's overall goal is to implement the arts throughout all core subjects in the self-contained classroom, this study focused on the beginning of that effort by working with a teaching artist to instruct the students in basic art skills and consult with the classroom teacher in how to effectively implement more art opportunities in the classroom. Arts integration is not a simple curriculum change and must be built up gradually to maintain a high quality program (Seidel et al., 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

What is the impact of arts integration on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom? Art in the self-contained classroom at the high school level is

typically limited to craft style projects that have a definite pattern and appearance similar to elementary school crafts. According Loughlin andAnderson (2015), in their article about the history of arts integration, students with disabilities are rarely expected to engage in higher-order thinking activities and the arts provides this opportunity. An effective arts program can help to bridge the gap to more abstract thinking, nuances and more complex relationships. Students with moderate to severe disabilities can be passive in their learning and they can learn to expect adults to provide them with the answers without much effort. “In contrast, art-making requires students to take a more active role in their learning by . . . taking ownership of their work” (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015, p. 15). Additionally, teachers can integrate academic tasks with the arts to make them more engaging and capture the interest of the students.

In Seidel and his colleagues’ (2009) report, the importance of a high quality arts integration program is emphasized. Without quality and purposeful planning, the arts have minimal connection to academic activities and are often included as an afterthought or to fill time in the classroom. When extensive training and planning are included in the arts integration process, then student engagement is more likely and the connections to academics and real life are endless (Glass, Meyer & Rose, 2013). An integral part of high quality arts integration is collaboration with professional artists and other general education teachers. An artist who is trained to work with educators on arts integration can be invaluable to a teacher in the process of integration as they can offer a fresh perspective on how art can create relationships and deepen students’ understanding (Pennisi, 2012). In the special education classroom, para educators are typically present and they also need to have training in working with students in the arts in order to have a successful program (Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008).

An effective, high quality arts integration program engages students and is led by a team of educators who collaborate effectively. Although the arts have been integrated in education in different ways in the past, it hasn't been until recently that the quality indicators of arts integration programs have been identified (Seidel et al., 2009). Arts integration is a relatively new area of research and especially with the focus on special education. Catterall (2015) believes that future research, when focused on brain research and human development, will be naturally drawn to more research in special education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of the arts in the self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Arts integration has been shown to have a significantly positive effect on students with disabilities (Robinson, 2013) and yet few studies have been conducted with students with severe disabilities (Anderson, 2015b). This study focused on four students in the classroom who had a high rate of attendance and participated regularly in classroom activities.

To evaluate the impact of arts integration on students with disabilities, a practical action research design was used because the classroom teacher becomes the researcher, tries out different action plans in the classroom and involves others in the process (Creswell, 2015). The first art project that was evaluated in the study was one that was implemented by the classroom teacher and then the next three projects in the study were in collaboration with the teaching artist. The teaching artist visited the classroom six times but these three projects were ones that the classroom teacher and the teaching artist decided were the best showcases for their skills. A final art project was a combination of several acquired skills that the classroom teacher facilitated without the teaching artist. Some of the skills that were evidenced in the art projects

were: drawing, shape, lines and texture.

In addition to the teaching artist instructing the students in art skills, they also were a consultation to the teacher in a variety of ways including acquiring the correct art supplies, best practices in art instruction and evaluating the art work. The teaching artist and the classroom teacher together created a rubric to use in evaluating the work of the students in class. The rubric contained a rating for following the parameters of the project, creativity and behavior which included the correct use of supplies (Shafton, 2012). The goal of the rubric was to show that with an implementation of an art program in the classroom, students would improve in their art skills and behavior. Observational notes were also recorded by the classroom teacher immediately after class to record the students' interaction with the teaching artist, their enthusiasm for participation and any other relevant details that showed the effectiveness of the activity. The goal was for students to increase in their enthusiasm and interest in art and be more comfortable in using art as self-expression instead of copying directly from a model (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015).

### **Research Question**

What is the impact of arts integration on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom?

### **Definitions**

*Arts integration*- when visual art, music or dance is integrated with the curriculum. This can range from standalone projects to full integration with a subject like math or science (Robinson, 2013).

*Self-contained classroom*- in this particular high school, students in the self-contained classroom have moderate to severe disabilities and receive specially designed instruction all day (Shafton,

2012).

*Teaching artist*- a professional artist who is trained to teach in the K-12 classroom and collaborate with classroom teachers and administrators (Pennisi, 2012).

*Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*- framework that optimizes teaching so that students of all skill levels are engaged in the curriculum (Robinson, 2013).

### **Limitations**

The study focused on four students who were representative of the class based on the teacher's judgement but they weren't necessarily representative of the wide range of students who would be in a self-contained classroom. Students placed in the self-contained classroom are students whose needs cannot be met in general education. There were also some days when the students were absent, which may have affected the outcome of the study. Ideally, an arts integration project would include planning and working with other teachers in the building to integrate with core subjects. The classroom teacher in this study was the researcher and the research was started halfway through the school year so there was not time for preparation that would be ideal for a high quality arts integration program. In this study, the classroom teacher implemented the start of an arts integration program in collaboration with a teaching artist, hopefully building a foundation for further collaboration and eventually broadening the integration of the arts with other subjects.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All procedures were followed to obtain approval from the CWU Human Subjects Review Board to proceed with the study.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Definition of Arts Integration**

Arts integration is a broad topic that is defined differently by various researchers in education and the term is fairly new in its use in the education and arts communities (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015). Loughlin and Anderson (2015) lay out the history of arts integration giving the historical roots back to the 1930s but then it is defined and research starts in the 1990s to confirm that arts integration is an effective way to engage students of all skill levels.

Robinson (2013) defines arts integration as learning through and with the arts, a curricular connection process and arts integration as a collaborative engagement. Robinson goes on to list different methods that are used in arts integration such as storytelling involving formal and informal reflection. Robinson specifies different styles of arts integration varying from incorporating art projects to completely integrating all subjects with the arts by utilizing teaching artists and collaborating with arts teachers in the school district. Gullatt (2008) agrees with the Robinson's definition of arts integration but also labels different approaches under the general term: arts-injected, arts-included, arts-expansion and arts-professional. Gullatt (2008) agrees with Robinson (2013) that the effects of arts integration can be far reaching in their impact.

Appel (2006) reminds us that quality arts integration requires careful planning and when implemented effectively, can cultivate the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary for student success. Collaboration and planning are key to a high quality arts integration program which includes collaboration with parents and community artists (Brouillette, 2012; Robinson, 2013). Studies of arts integration programs have shown the importance of planning and research. Effective collaboration is also central to successful arts programs especially with special education students (Cruz, 2009).

In a study supporting arts integration for English language learners, Brouillette (2012) states that the association of arts participation with increased school engagement and improved academic achievement has been widely recognized. Arts integration is ideal in applying to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to reach all students including those with disabilities or those who are at-risk (Robinson, 2013). Robinson (2013) lists specific studies that show how the arts have a positive impact on disadvantaged students. According to Glass, Meyer and Rose (2013), the arts are an effective way to implement the UDL which not only allows a teacher to instruct at multiple levels but also promotes education reform towards inclusion. The ways in which students learn are highly variable and this variability is more the norm than the exception.

### **Students with Disabilities**

In Loughlin and Anderson's (2015) article reflecting on the historical progress of arts integration, they compare the use of arts integration with students in general education and then with those in special education. They cite research that supports the idea that the arts are an important component in students' social and emotional development who have moderate to severe disabilities and the arts provide them a way to discover their personal interests and talents. Arts integration shatters myths of special education students and their capacity to participate in the arts and self-expression (Cruz, 2009).

Schwartz and Pace (2008) present an example of a group of students with disabilities participating in an after-school art program. Pre-service teachers and graduate students worked with students after school and facilitated art-making which included each student creating a collage that reflected themselves. The pre-service teachers reported that they saw greater self-esteem and pride exhibited by the students when their artwork was professionally framed and installed at an exhibit at a local university. For many students with disabilities, the arts provide



a means to contribute their ideas in a positive and powerful way. Being immersed in the creative process, without teacher judgment or competition, enable students to flourish (Schwartz & Pace, 2008).

Causton-Theoharis (2008) presented a qualitative study of paraprofessionals as gatekeepers of authentic art production. Given that paraprofessionals are an integral part of the life skills classroom and special education in general, this perspective is very important in a successful arts integration program in the special education classroom. When teaching artists and art educators train paraprofessionals effectively, the possibilities for students are endless. Paraprofessionals either open or close the gate that provides access to the art curriculum and authentic art production. When there is appropriate communication with paraprofessionals, then creative expression and social inclusion are possible and full engagement in the art-making experience is possible (Causton-Theoharis, 2008).

### **Collaboration**

In an article by Kissinger and Ponder (2009), a pilot project of collaboration between teachers and teaching artists was implemented. The goals centered on raising the quality of work from the students and also creating instructional materials that could be shared with other teachers effectively. The teaching artists in the project felt that they had a deficit of skills when teaching a class of students with varied skill levels so an action plan was developed to improve training of teaching artists (Kissinger & Ponder, 2009). Special education teachers who collaborated with teaching artists also stated that during the project, they learned that their students were capable of more than they thought they were at the beginning. They saw their students improve in ways unexpectedly like expanding their vocabulary, increasing in creativity, social skills and pride in their work. Most importantly, the special education teachers felt

empowered to lead art activities with their students that would allow them to be successful (Kissinger & Ponder, 2009). Effective collaboration and training for teachers and artists are necessary in building a high quality arts integration program (Seidel et al., 2009).

When artists and art teachers are trained effectively to work with students with disabilities, then the students are more successful (Shafton, 2012). Shafton (2012), in her book *Making Art Special*, breaks down ways to effectively work with students with severe disabilities. She emphasizes the importance of preparing the students by giving them a tour of the art room and teaching them how to use and take care of art supplies. Shafton (2012) also mentions the importance of training paraprofessionals to work with and support the students rather than doing the art work for them.

Pennisi (2012) describes another partnership where teachers and teaching artists worked together. They collaborated to create rubrics and create lesson plans that met objectives of both the classroom teacher and the teaching artist. True collaboration goes beyond having a guest lecturer or the teaching artist provide information to the students. It empowers the classroom teacher to incorporate the arts across the curriculum that supports the students and provides high quality instruction in both the arts and in the core subject (Pennisi, 2012).

### CHAPTER III

#### JOURNAL ARTICLE

The following article details the specifics of the action research study that was carried out to show the impact of the arts in the self-contained classroom. The article will be submitted to the *Rural Special Education Quarterly* for review. The article follows the guidelines set forth by the *Rural Special Education Quarterly* as well as the guidelines for practical action research study set out by Creswell (2015).

**THE IMPACT OF THE ARTS FOR STUDENTS WITH MODERATE TO  
SEVERE DISABILITIES IN A SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM  
IN A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL**

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**Abstract**

Students with moderate to severe disabilities are often left out of arts programs, especially in rural areas where resources are limited and drama, music and art classes are often not available. Research shows that engagement increases for students in special education when the arts are implemented (Anderson, 2015). The action research study supported this by focusing on students with moderate to severe disabilities in a self-contained classroom. The classroom teacher worked with a teaching artist to start an art program for students with moderate to severe disabilities over a six-week period. It is possible to create a high quality arts integration program while implementing effective planning and collaboration with other teachers and artists. This study showed an increase in student interest in art and an increase in understanding of art skills when collaboration within the framework of arts integration was implemented.

**Introduction**

What is the impact of arts integration on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom? This practical action research study was carried out by the classroom teacher in a rural high school. Students with moderate to severe disabilities are

often left out of enrichment activities like the arts even in a self-contained classroom. The classroom teacher wanted the students to be able to participate in an arts integration program because the arts provides a way for students with disabilities to engage in higher-order thinking and have opportunities to discover personal interests and talents (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015). The students in this self-contained classroom had previously engaged in art projects that were more like crafts where there was a definite model and most end products looked the same. The classroom teacher wanted the students to learn to express themselves through art and acquire some new skills to be able to create more complex projects down the road. Introducing the students to new art skills also paves the way for more arts integration in the future so that the arts can eventually be connected to core subjects like reading, math and science. After researching arts integration and how to start implementing it in the classroom, the classroom teacher chose four students to be the focus of the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the instruction and from the art that the students produced.

### **Literature Review**

The literature about arts integration had several emerging themes. The various definitions of arts integration, components of a quality arts integration program and how to effectively engage students were common themes in the literature researched. Arts integration is a broad topic that is defined differently by various researchers in education. Robinson (2013) defined arts integration as learning through and with the arts, arts integration as a curricular connection process and arts integration as a collaborative engagement. Robinson specifies four different styles of arts integration varying from incorporating standalone art projects to completely integrating all aspects of the curriculum with the arts by utilizing teaching artists and

collaborating with arts teachers in the school or school district. Even though there are different styles, they are still all considered arts integration (Gullatt, 2008). There are a variety of ways that the arts can be integrated into the curriculum. The arts can be appreciated as a standalone subject but more importantly, as a way to more thoroughly comprehend other subjects (Gullatt, 2008). The arts allow students to access different parts of their brains in hands-on experiences and in the process, they are able to acquire and process new information (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015). Arts integration also creates an environment that facilitates self-efficacy in students which is the ultimate goal for those students who are disadvantaged or have disabilities (Robinson, 2013).

Appel (2006) reminds us that quality arts integration requires careful planning and when implemented effectively can cultivate the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary for student success. Collaboration and planning are key to a high quality arts integration program which includes collaboration with parents, community artists and other teachers (Brouillette, 2012; Robinson, 2013; Seidel et al., 2009).

Schwartz (2008) presented an example of a group of students with disabilities participating in an after-school art program. For many students with disabilities, the arts provide a means to contribute their ideas in a positive and powerful way. Being immersed in the creative process, without teacher judgment or competition, enabled the students to flourish (Schwartz, 2008). Robinson (2012) encourages educators who doubt the positive impact of the creative arts in a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) format to look at the use of a co-equal cognitive arts integration approach as an excellent strategy for planning and teaching the common core standards.

In an article by Kissinger and Ponder (2009), a pilot project of collaboration between

special education teachers and teaching artists was implemented. The goals centered on raising the quality of work from the students and also creating instructional materials that could be shared with other teachers effectively. The teaching artists in the project felt that they had a deficit of skills when teaching a class of students with varied skill levels so it was determined that effective training was the most important part of collaboration.

Causton-Theoharis (2008) presented a qualitative study of paraprofessionals as gatekeepers of authentic art production. Given that paraprofessionals are an integral part of the life skills classroom and special education in general, this perspective is very important in a successful arts integration program in the special education classroom. When teaching artists and art educators train paraprofessionals effectively, the possibilities to include students are broadened. Paraprofessionals in a self-contained classroom often have more one-on-one interaction with students than the teacher does. The paraprofessionals can be tempted to do work for the students instead of letting them struggle to get the answer and the same can be true in the art-making process. Causton-Theoharis (2008) suggested that in training paraprofessionals, they are encouraged to either do the assigned art project alongside the student or step back and only help with mobility issues or supplies. Since self-expression is a crucial part of art-making, it is important that the student is allowed the freedom to participate without judgement. When there is appropriate communication and training with paraprofessionals, then creative expression, social inclusion, and full engagement in the art-making experience are possible.

Cultivating a high quality arts integration program in a rural area can be a challenge due to limited resources and access to professional artists. Larger arts organization in big cities are starting to reach out to rural communities via online access and even visiting communities in some cases. The Silk Road Ensemble out of Boston, for instance, has been working in Lane

Deer, Montana for several years and has had great success in building on local culture to integrate the arts into the curriculum in the schools in Lane Deer (Umezaki-Shakuhachi, 2014).

These studies indicate a strong support of arts integration programs for students with moderate to severe disabilities and they also stress the importance of building a high quality program in collaboration with professional artists and teachers which can take years to establish. This study focused on the very beginning of building a high quality arts program that will hopefully continue to grow in the future.

### **Research Question**

What is the impact of arts integration on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom?

### **Method**

Practical action research was used as the research design because the study addressed practical issues within the classroom in collaboration with a teaching artist from the community. This design included quantitative and qualitative data that were collected from art instruction and the students' art work. The classroom teacher started with a goal of implementing an arts integration program in the self-contained classroom with students with moderate to severe disabilities. Observational notes were recorded by the classroom teacher during and directly after instruction and a rubric was created to evaluate the art work created by the students.

Collaboration is not only an important part of implementing a high quality arts Integration program but it is a key component in the action research process. The classroom teacher contacted the state arts commission to access a list of qualified teaching artists. There was a teaching artist that lived within 50 miles of the school and contact was established. The teaching artist agreed to visit the classroom and evaluated what would be the best approach for



the self-contained classroom. The teaching artist had experience teaching art in the community and in a wide variety of classrooms in the area but had not had experience with students with moderate to severe disabilities. The teaching artist's role was to consult with the classroom teacher and offer art instruction to the students over a six week time period. Not only did the teaching artist and classroom teacher collaborate about art instruction, they also discussed the rubrics and how the students performed. Other collaborators included three paraprofessionals who were present during the art instruction and helped the students with their projects. The paraprofessionals were trained to help the students without doing the art work for them. The classroom teacher discussed the results of the study with the teaching artist and the co-author of this article.

### **Participants**

A purposive sample of student participants was used in this study because the four students consistently attended class 80% or more of the time and were willing participants in art activities during class time. A purposive sample is a group of participants chosen by the researcher who the teacher determines are representative of all students in the class (Bui, 2014).

The sample of students is illustrated in Table 1.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Eligibility</i>	<i>Other Characteristics</i>
<i>A</i>	Male	15 years old	Down Syndrome-intellectual disability	Non-verbal, good receptive language, no physical disabilities.
<i>B</i>	Female	17 years old	Intellectual disability	Good expressive and receptive language.
<i>C</i>	Male	16 years old	Intellectual disability	Good expressive and receptive language, one side of his body is impaired so mobility is limited.
<i>D</i>	Female	18 years old	Down Syndrome-intellectual disability	Impaired expressive language, good receptive language, no physical impairment.

Table 1 *Demographics of Students*

### **Setting & Materials**

The research for this study took place in a self-contained classroom in a rural high school in Washington State with students, age 15-21 years old with moderate to severe disabilities. The instruction for the art was implemented by the classroom teacher and the teaching artist over a period of six weeks. The instruction took place from 10:45-11:40 am in the self-contained classroom. All students were seated around two large tables broken down into two groups of 4 students each. The art supplies were in the middle of the tables and instruction was given by the

teacher or teaching artist using the document camera. Paraprofessionals were seated by the students to help as needed.

The teaching artist had created detailed lesson plans that were accessible on the educational service district (ESD) website and these lesson plans were used as a basis for the instruction that took place. The teaching artist also gave a list of supplies to the teacher that would be needed for the projects such as artist pencils, kneaded erasers, pastels and art paper. Each week, the artist sent the classroom teacher the lesson plan a few days ahead of her visit to the classroom. The email with the lesson plan was helpful because it included a list of supplies needed. The art teacher in the building was also helpful in providing some of the supplies so they did not all need to be purchased. The lesson plan also included a learning target, a timeline for the class and a collection of professional art work that illustrated the concept being taught. For one of the last lessons, the classroom teacher was asked to choose the art work to be used from a larger collection.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected by the teacher during and after the art instruction over the six week period. The art instruction took place 10:45-11:45 so it was right before lunch. This enabled time to look over and edit observational notes and discuss the details with the teaching artist. Observational notes were recorded by classroom teacher in a blank notebook. Notes were taken on the four students and anything they said or behavior they exhibited during the art instruction or work time. Notes were also taken on the instruction and how it was presented. The observational notes were mostly recorded directly after the art time because the classroom

teacher was usually rotating between the tables for the students or assisting with instruction. After the students went to lunch, there was a time slot of 5-10 minutes when the classroom teacher and the teaching artist could discuss what happened during class. This helped to clarify and add to the notes if necessary.

The second way of collecting data was the rubric that was created to evaluate the students' art work (Figure 2). The teaching artist acknowledged that she did not like evaluating students' art because she wanted them to enjoy the process rather than worrying about what the teacher wants it to look like. The teacher and teaching artist agreed on creating a simple rubric that included following directions of the project, creativity and behavior. The teaching artist suggested that cleaning up and knowing how to take care of specific art supplies could be part of the behavior section of the rubric.

I ...believe in the beginning that I'd rather use rubrics as a tool to have students realize missing/lacking criteria and send them back to add/edit/improve the work to meet the criteria, so the knowledge is gained and practiced. In this particular case, I believe the rubric you decided on is better for the self-contained special education classroom, than the traditional one that would be used. (G. Gonzales Garcia, personal communication, June 8, 2015)

The rubric was on a clipboard and was marked for the four students once they had finished their final product. The teacher consulted with the teaching artist about the rubrics and also had two additional meetings after the 6 week instructional period to review rubrics and the students' progress or what could be done differently during instruction to engage the students more effectively in the future.

I believe the rubric you decided on is better for the self-contained special

education classroom, than the traditional one that would be used. In the future, if I had to create a rubric for visual art lessons taught to at-risk/high-risk (incarcerated) youth, I would model it on the version you created in combination with a "traditional" rubric. (G. Gonzales Garcia, personal communication, June 8, 2015).

### **First Project**

The first art project assessed was introduced by the classroom teacher as part of a literature unit on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This was the first time during the year where the students constructed art projects where they could be creative and not follow specific steps to create essentially the same craft product. Since trees and the forest had been a significant part of the story, the students were asked to create trees out of construction paper and glue. They tore the paper and were not allowed to use scissors. The teacher showed the students various examples of art where trees were created with different mediums such as watercolors or pastels.

According to the observational notes, students A, B and D appeared excited to participate in the art project but student C was hesitant. He said that he “did not like to draw” and was not very good at it. When the classroom teacher repeated that he did not have to draw but could just tear some paper with assistance, he was willing to give it a try. His mobility on one side is limited so accommodations needed to be carefully considered for student C. Another student offered to hold the paper Student C tore it and then he was able to complete the task. The trees that were created were creative and each one looked different. Using supplies that were familiar to the students (construction paper and glue) was helpful in keeping them on task and motivated to complete it. Figure 1 and the subsequent figures showed that the students found it challenging

to be very creative but this was just the beginning. They all really enjoyed the part about tearing up the paper. The teaching artist was not present during this class activity but the products were shared with the artist so they had a good idea of the students' capabilities.

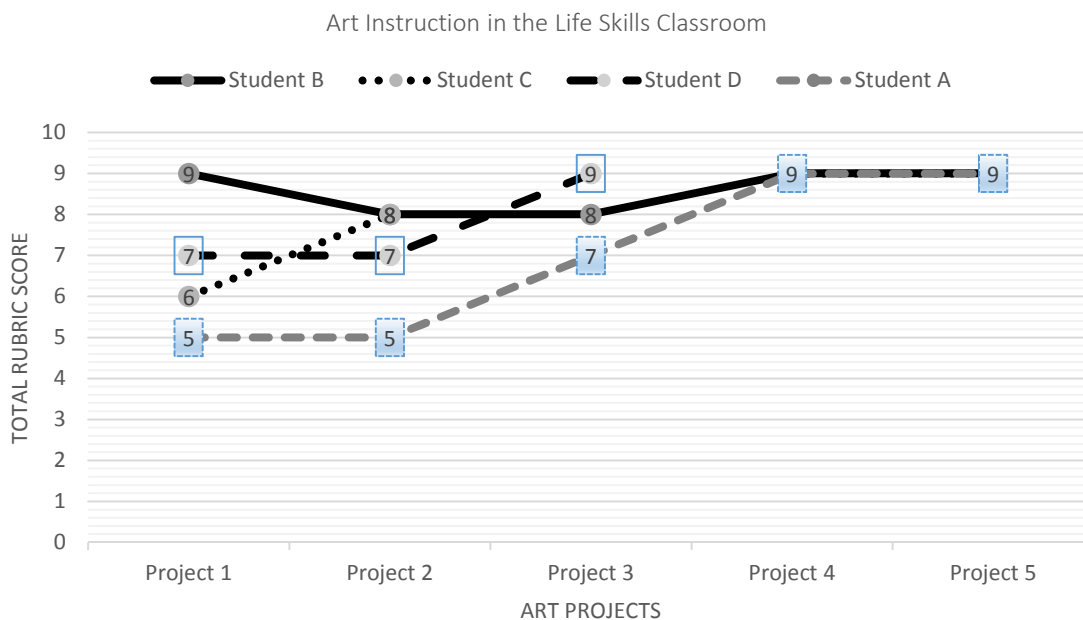


Figure 1

*Student performance based on rubric (Table 2).*

## Second Project

The second art project was the first lesson taught by the teaching artist and it focused on lines. The artist had visited the classroom a few days before and was introduced to the students but this was their first time receiving instruction. This aspect proved to be a little challenging for three of the students. Students A, B and D were easily distracted after 30 minutes of instruction and got up to look at things in a different part of the classroom. Students B and D were easily redirected by the classroom teacher but student A took a little longer to return to task but eventually did. This was not as much of a problem during future lessons and this may have been

due to the pattern and routine that had been established by the visiting artist.

During the instruction, the teaching artist taught the basics of drawing different lines such as solid, dash, straight, curved, zigzag and spiral using the document camera. The students then looked at work by professional artists and pointed out examples of lines in the artwork. All the students were very enthusiastic about this and many of them volunteered to point out examples of lines not only in the exhibited art work but in the classroom as well. The teaching artist realized during this lesson that the students would do better working on abstract art providing for more self-expression rather than doing activities like observational drawing.

As I observed their actions while they were trying to copy what I was drawing on the document camera, I realized that observational drawing will not work for them. I think they would be much happier if we made it more abstract for them and it would give them more freedom. I think they will do well with that. (G. Gonzales Garcia, personal communication, June 8, 2015).

The teaching artist was also knowledgeable about different accommodations for students such as putting the drawing paper on a rubber mat or taping it to the desk so it wouldn't slide around, making it difficult to draw.

### **Third Project**

The third art project was focused on value and the students learned about pastels and how to mix colors to create different values of color. By this time, students were used to the routine of the teaching artist visiting the classroom and doing an exercise of drawing lines with them at the beginning of class. The teaching artist effectively built on their previous knowledge and their ability to draw varieties of lines without prompting increased. None of the four students were as easily distracted during this lesson and they participated the full length of time during the class.

Once again, examples were shown of professional artwork to give them an idea of what they would be working on.

The pastels were a new tool for the students so a few of them were anxious and did not like the texture of it on their hands. The teaching artist showed the students how to remove the residue from their hands—with a dry paper towel, not soap and water—so this made them less anxious. The students enjoyed mixing the colors with pastels. The requirements for the project was to create a square of the same color but adding white to it in each layer to make the shades different. Even though that was the example, some students wanted to use different colors and we allowed them to take that creative license. Part of the evaluation was to see if they could be creative on their own and break away from the teacher's example which many of them did. Most of the students enjoyed the pastels and often went back to use them for other projects for the rest of the school year.

#### **Fourth Project**

Three-dimensional art was the focus of the fourth art project and paper strips were folded into different designs to create sculptures. This project required more preparation by cutting pieces of construction paper before the start of class. The teaching artist started with the routine of drawing lines and then she instructed them in different ways to fold strips of paper in order to create paper sculptures. This project created the most diverse group of projects compared to the others. Student C needed assistance from a paraprofessional to hold the paper while he folded it. This was good practice for those students who needed to work on fine motor skills. Student B especially liked this project and named her piece "Angelfish".

This was the final time that the teaching artist would be in the class and this final project was the most challenging because of the number of steps and the lack of an example to follow.



The artist just showed them how to fold and then the students went forward from there. Based on the observational notes, the students were very autonomous during this lesson and at this point understood and comprehended directions quicker than before. It could also be that they just found this project more interesting to do.

### **Fifth Project**

The fifth art project was a project that used a few different concepts that had been taught and incorporated them into one piece of art. The instruction was given by the classroom teacher based on the skills that had been taught by the teaching artist and ideas taken from *Making Art Special* (Shafton, 2012). The classroom teacher used the concepts of line and value established by the teaching artist and students created lines with yarn and glued them on pieces of matte cardboard. They could create whatever lines they wanted (straight, curvy, spiral, etc.). The yarn took 24 hours to dry and create a texture. The students then were instructed to add color to the piece using pastels.

Based on the observational notes, the students seemed to enjoy this project but since there was no example from the teacher they often looked to each other for inspiration. Student D liked to draw hearts so pretty soon everyone else was drawing hearts. They were still their own designs and the students voiced how much they liked their project and wanted to show it to their parents. A rubric based on the example in Table 2 was used to evaluate the students' work for the fifth project.

Table 2

*Rubric for Line/ Drawing Lesson*

	3	2	1
<b>Meet project criteria</b>	Showed understanding of most of the various types of lines that were introduced.	Showed understanding of some of the types of lines that were introduced.	Did not show understanding of concept of lines that were introduced.
<b>Creativity</b>	Showed interest in the creative application of lines.	Copied example of teacher or paraeducator in drawing lines.	Did not draw lines as shown by teaching artist.
<b>Behavior</b>	Paid attention most of the time during instruction by teaching artist.	Paid attention during most of the instructional period but was easily distracted.	Had a very difficult time paying attention during the instructional and activity periods during class.

### Data Analysis

The results of the study showed an increase in student performance from the first art project to the last project as shown in the following charts. The rubric's total score was calculated by adding up the scores for each project (criteria, creativity, behavior) and then identified with each project as previously explained. All of the students reached a score of 9 at the end which was a perfect score. Student A made the most improvement from a total score of 5 at the beginning of the study.

Once the students received art instruction, the students were more likely to use their newly acquired skills instead of only using crayons and white paper. When asked to draw something illustrating an experience they had over Spring Break, the students asked if they could use the oil pastels. "I like these a lot better than crayons...because I can mix the colors," said Student C. Based on observational notes, students also showed an increase in engagement.

Students became more willing to participate in the art projects and showed more willingness to be creative and break away from the example often provided by the classroom teacher or the teaching artist.

There could have been a variety of reasons that the students improved in criteria, creativity and behavior but the data were only collected by the classroom teacher based on observational notes and the art work collected. The teaching artist offered her perspective as to why she thought the improvements took place:

The criteria improvement I think can be attributed to the repeated review of skills learned, that then became the warm up to not only remind them of the art elements taught in previous lessons, but also prepared them mentally for art-making--that is, focused them for the creative experience. The improvement in creativity I believe is due [to]the comfort they gained with being shown how to use the materials and understanding the materials (i.e., oil pastels lend themselves to blending in a way that crayons do not). The improvement in behavior I think can be attributed to the previous two rubric markers--that is the repetition in reviewing the skills and art elements, and the focus that the repetition provided, and in the comfort with and understanding of the art materials, helped in their ability to pay attention more continually. (G. Gonzales Garcia, personal communication, July 25, 2015)

### **Student Performance**

As seen in Figure 1, overall, the students all reached the highest score by the end of the study. Students A, C, D struggled the most initially with the art projects but eventually showed more focus and an increase in ability to understand expectations and create their own projects

without copying exactly what the teacher did.

Figure 2 illustrates the performance of student A. Student A had a difficult time initially focusing on instruction from the teaching artist. His attention span was very short and he often wanted to take breaks and do something different. By the time project 3 came around, he was looking forward to seeing the teaching artist again and paid good attention to the directions. During projects 4 and 5, his behavior was much improved, in that he helped correctly clean up and store the art supplies. His creativity also increased and he showed this by the initiative he took to create art of his own without copying the teacher's example or even other students' work. When asked what his favorite art projects were, he said the paper sculptures and the pastels.

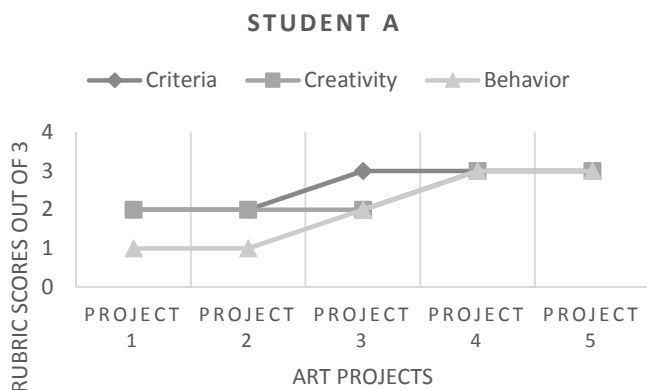


Figure 2  
*Student A performance based on rubric (Table 2).*

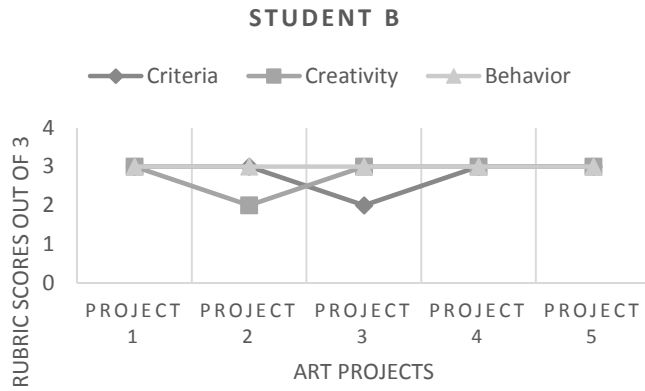


Figure 3  
*Student B performance based on rubric (Table 2).*

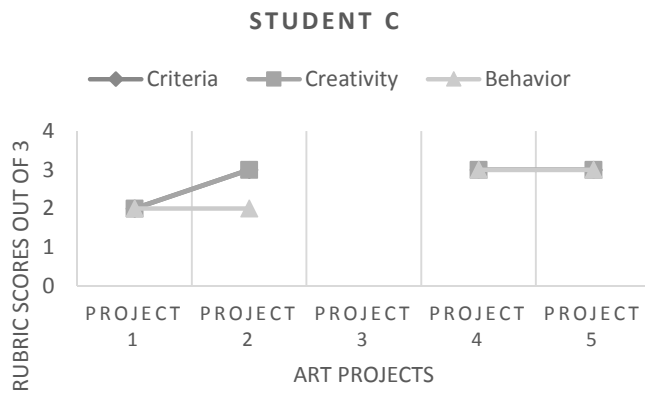


Figure 4  
*Student C performance based on rubric (Table 2).*

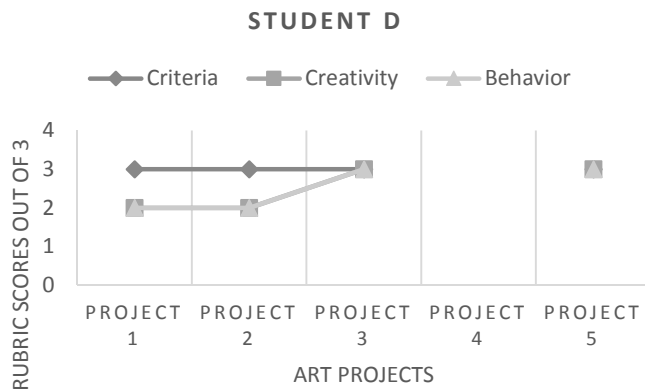


Figure 5  
*Student D performance based on rubric (Table 2).*

Student B started out with loving art and being very enthusiastic about learning some new things (Figure 3). The one hour project time was a little long in the beginning which caused her to want to move to a different activity after about 30 minutes but upon redirection, she returned to her work without a problem. For project 3, she had difficulty understanding the directions of the project but eventually she understood and ended up giving the project another try the next day and did very well.

Student C, as seen in Figure 4 initially had difficulty with the task. Because of his limited movement with one hand, he was very open about the fact that he did not like to draw or do art projects so getting him on-task was challenging. He did miss two weeks and missed doing the 3<sup>rd</sup> art project because of being absent. Even though he was absent for the pastels project, he was given instruction and this ended up being his favorite medium to use. His attitude toward doing art projects drastically changed by the end and he looked forward to doing art.

Student D likes to be creative and draw when she has down time (Figure 5). Initially, she tried to follow exactly what the teacher did. By the last project, she used the medium to create her own style. She was absent for the 4<sup>th</sup> project. Student D had difficulty working in groups so when she was given the opportunity to practice the different mediums on her own, separate from the group, she seemed to enjoy it much more and was more creative—breaking away from the teacher's example.

## **Limitations**

The classroom teacher in this study was the researcher who started teaching halfway through the school year so there was not time for preparation that would be ideal for a high quality arts integration program. Ideally, an arts integration project would include planning and working with other teachers in the building to integrate with core subjects. The focus of this action research study was building a foundation for an arts integration program by teaching basic art skills and collaborating with the teaching artist.

The study focused on four students who were representative of the class based on the teacher's judgement but they were not necessarily representative of the wide range of students who would be in a self-contained classroom. Although these students had good attendance overall, two of the students each were absent on a day when one of the art lessons was given.

Although the first art project was an effort to integrate art with a core subject, the rest of the art projects were standalone. It would have been ideal to integrate the other art projects with core subjects as well but at the time of the study, teaching basic art skills to the students became more important.

## **Discussion**

The classroom teacher intended to implement a full arts integration program across the curriculum within the first semester of teaching in the self-contained classroom but after research

on high quality arts integration programs, there were two components that were common threads: extensive planning to effectively implement arts integration and collaboration with experts to maintain high quality arts instruction. It became clear that high quality arts integration takes time so the teacher chose to focus on creating a foundation for an arts integration program by teaching basic art skills and collaborating with a teaching artist. Visual art was something that the students were already familiar with so it seemed like a natural place to start. Collaboration with a professional artist was valuable to the students but also provided training to the classroom teacher in implementing high quality art instruction. Arts integration provides a way for students with moderate to severe disabilities to gain in confidence as they acquire a new skill and this was the focus of the visual art lessons over the course of the six weeks (Schwartz & Pace, 2008).

Due to the rural location of the school, the resources for finding a qualified teaching artist were limited and provided a challenge to the process. The classroom teacher contacted the Washington State Arts Commission which had a list of teaching artists who had received training in the past and there was only one qualified teaching artist within 50 miles of the school. Even though the local arts program had been discontinued, the list of artists and resources were still on the website and accessible to teachers. Although access to museums and high quality art instruction may be limited in a rural area, there are often resources through state art organizations and summer professional development in a larger city that could provide the training necessary for classroom teachers. There are also museums in rural parts of the state that provided yearly professional development in art education to both classroom teachers and teaching artists.

In addition to integrating the arts with various subjects such as reading, writing, math and science, another purpose of arts integration is providing students with positive ways to express themselves and be contributing members of the community. A well-rounded transition plan that



gives students input for their future, based on their interests, is very important and this may include activities in the arts. Productive recreational and leisure activities, including the arts, have been shown to increase psychological stability and lower rates of smoking and drug use among students in transition (Swedeen et al, 2010).

Research in the area of arts integration in the self-contained classroom was very difficult to find. Most research focused on students with learning disabilities or with learning disabilities and moderate physical disabilities (Catterall, 2015). More research is needed in studying the effects of music, visual art and dance movement on students with moderate to severe disabilities and their level of engagement in the classroom. More studies in this area would not only show the effects the arts have on the students in the self-contained classroom, but also may provide rationale for inclusion in general education arts classes.

Most research of arts integration now is also often focused on metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and New York City where there are well-funded, large arts organizations that provide multiple opportunities and an endless list of teaching artists. There have been more efforts, however, to reach out to more rural communities. The Silk Road Ensemble out of Boston, for example, has been working in Lame Deer, Montana for several years and has had great success in building on local culture to integrate the arts into the curriculum in the schools (Umezaki-Shakuhachi, 2014). This provides a good example of how rural arts programs can be successful for all students in the future when we collaborate with professional artists and maintain a goal of high quality arts integration.

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#### CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What is the impact of arts integration on students with moderate to severe disabilities in the self-contained classroom? The action research process helped me, as the classroom teacher to see how arts integration impacts my students in the self-contained classroom. Through observing their behavior and participation in art instruction, I could see the positive impact it had on their confidence in self-expression and in their knowledge of basic art skills. The study and research also showed how important it is to have high quality instruction in the arts. Building a high quality, meaningful arts integration program takes time and work to build relationships for productive collaboration and ensuring that all students are engaged.

Now that the start of an arts integration program has been established in this self-contained classroom, there is a plan to gradually broaden the arts that are incorporated each year. Several students in the class enjoy getting up in front of people and dancing and singing so building on that strength would be a way to expand the program. Even though most studies do not include students with moderate to severe disabilities, the same concepts apply since they are each individuals with different strengths and challenges.

Students with significant disabilities can gain confidence as they participate in the arts (Schwartz, 2008) which can lead to greater self-determination. They need to learn how to choose their activities and how they want to use their leisure time so they can be more successful in their post-school lives (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark & Little, 2015). There was a survey conducted recently by the state of Washington on the National Core Indicators (2014) which evaluated how much adults with disabilities were involved in planning their transition to post-school life and choosing the activities in which they were included. There were still 20% of adults with disabilities who did not participate in making important decisions about their care and 80% of adults with disabilities did not have paid jobs in the community—part-time or full-

time. Empowering students with self-determination skills can help them be part of planning their future so they can have a job and be contributing members of the community. Students in special education are often left out of high quality arts instruction but they may benefit the most from arts instruction because it is hands-on and provides a non-judgmental environment for students to express themselves (Schwartz, 2008).

### **Future Research**

More research is needed in studying the effects of music, visual art and dance movement on students with moderate to severe disabilities and their level of engagement in the classroom (Catterall, 2015). More studies in this area would not only show the effects the arts have on the students in the self-contained classroom, but also may provide rationale for inclusion in general education arts classes.

Most research of arts integration is also often focused on metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and New York City where there are well-funded, large arts organizations that provide more opportunities. The Arts in Special Education Consortium in New York City is a good resource for teachers but professional development seminars are focused on the teachers and artists in New York. The International Organization on Art and Disability at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. is also a helpful resource for teachers and artists across the country because they provide online resources including webinars. There have been more efforts to reach out to more rural communities. The Silk Road Ensemble out of Boston, for instance, has been working in Lame Deer, Montana for several years and has had great success in building on local culture to integrate the arts into the curriculum in the schools (Umezaki-Shakuhachi, 2014). This provides a good example of how rural arts programs can be successful for all students in the future. Arts organizations in metropolitan areas can provide excellent resources—both online and in-person

in building a foundation for an arts program in a rural area.

Future research in the self-contained classroom can be conducted with a variety of other arts activities such as drama, music and dance. Studies could be in the self-contained classroom but could also be applied in an inclusionary setting in a general education classroom, depending on the students and the support from general education teachers and the community. Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School of Education currently has two studies focused on arts integration ([www.projectzero.org](http://www.projectzero.org)). One is studying the impact of displaying student art in school administrators' offices and another is focused on teaching artists and why they choose to teach. Past studies have focused on arts organizations and schools in various parts of the world and how they impact student learning.

Students in the self-contained classroom are often given art projects with very specific steps. Allowing students to express themselves through art instead of only following certain steps can build confidence in students and opens up a wide variety of opportunities for them in their future.

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